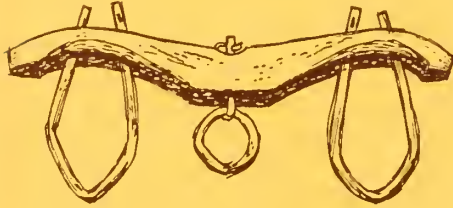


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Loafing with Lincoln



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For Marion D. Pratt, a
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Mayne C. Temple

Loafing with Lincoln

By WAYNE C. TEMPLE

AT TIMES Abraham Lincoln's mind was seized by intense sadness, but on other occasions he was the very soul of wit. He loved funny stories, jokes and good companionship. Humor served an important purpose in his life: it provided relief from somber worries or nervous tension built up by law cases. Lincoln enjoyed sitting with a congenial group of his colleagues, exchanging stories or discussing politics and current events. And one of his favorite loafing spots was a drug store. The history of this particular firm is an interesting facet in Lincoln's busy life.

Dr. William Smith Wallace, who had graduated from the medical college at the University of Pennsylvania in 1824,¹ came to Springfield, Illinois, in 1836.² At first he did not intend to practice medicine; he had come out from Pennsylvania to speculate in land, but his many friends coaxed him to treat their various ailments. As a result, his patients soon asked him to settle among them. Within a few months, Frances Jane Todd of Lexington, Kentucky, arrived in town to "visit" her

sister, Mrs. Ninian Wirt Edwards. Dr. Wallace was introduced to this young lady, and this was the beginning of their courtship.³ In time, Lincoln would also be introduced to one of the Todd sisters (perhaps by either Ninian W. Edwards or William S. Wallace). The former rail-splitter and Dr. Wallace were destined to be brothers-in-law, and they soon developed a warm friendship, too.

Lawyer Lincoln rode into Springfield from New Salem on April 15, 1837, to become the junior law partner of John Todd Stuart who had an upstairs office listed as No. 4 Hoffman's Row which was on North Fifth Street. This brick building was northwest of the public square. But these counselors at law seem to have been located over No. 5, only the entrance and stairway being at No. 4. In the room directly above No. 4 was another good friend of Lincoln's: Dr. Anson G. Henry.⁴

On the same day that Lincoln moved to Springfield, Andrew W. Hughes reported that he had rented No. 4, street level, for his drug business.⁵ This was a new location, since he had opened his first

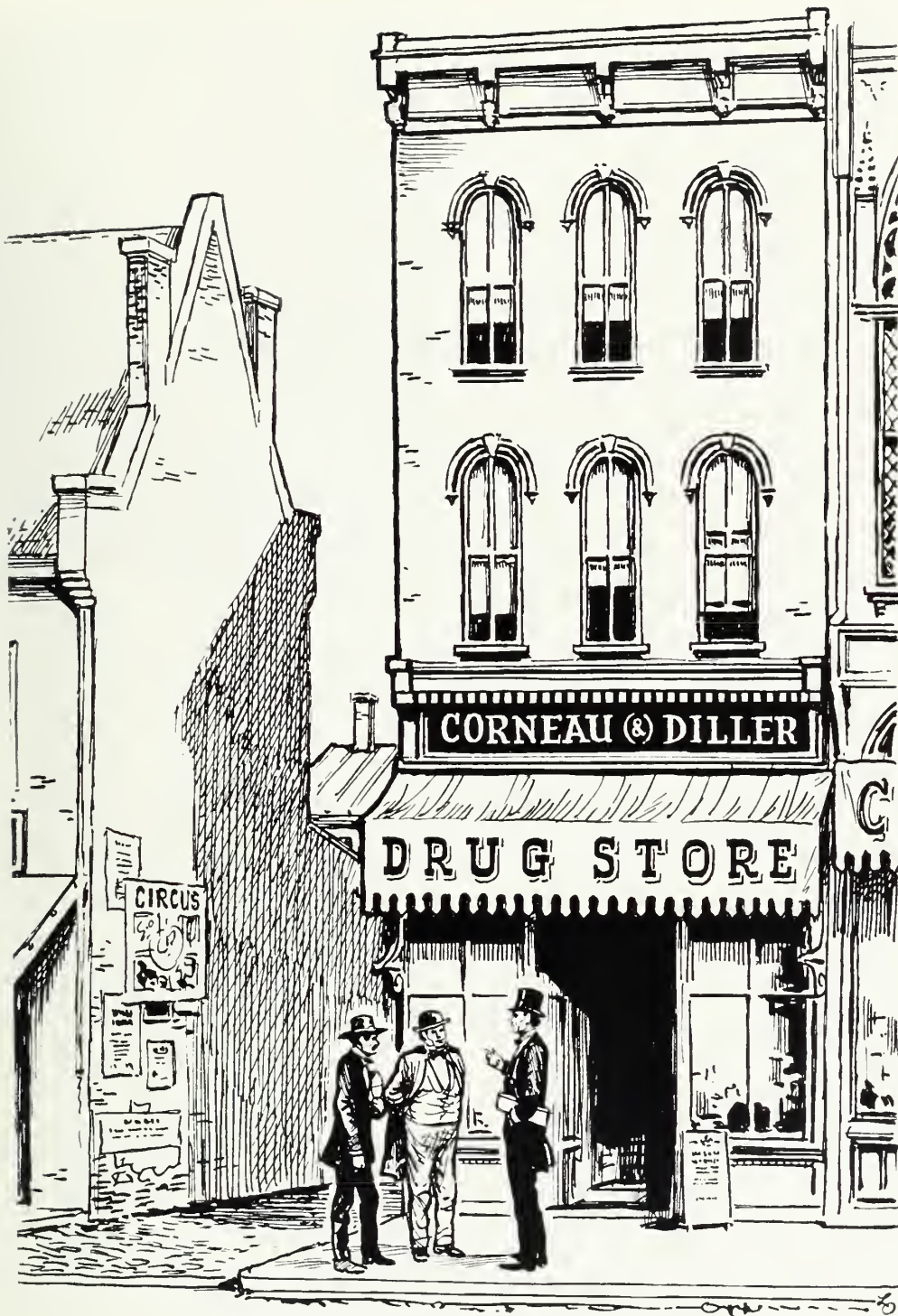
store on July 2, 1836 (according to the *Sangamo Journal*). But after a year in Springfield, Hughes sold his business, returned east and died in 1875 at Washington, D. C.⁶ His first home had been in Baltimore, Maryland.

Pressure from Springfield inhabitants forced Dr. Wallace to hang out his shingle as a physician. On July 27, 1837, he placed an advertisement in a local newspaper announcing that he was offering "his professional services to the [people] of Springfield and vicinity." Dr. Wallace further declared that he could be found at his newly-acquired drug store. A physician on the frontier often needed an auxiliary income in order to survive. So, Dr. Wallace quickly purchased the store formerly owned by A. W. Hughes. Taking the sign of the "Golden Mortar," he dispensed—wholesale and retail—drugs, paints, oils, dye stuffs, fancy articles, cigars and other forms of tobacco. Since this drug store was at No. 4, street level, in Hoffman's Row,⁷ Lincoln—as he started up the stairs to his office every day—undoubtedly saw Dr. Wallace and the inviting shop very often. Here was an ideal place to loaf and talk with educated men. Dr. Wallace had a fine group of Pennsylvania friends who frequented the establishment. Lincoln, in addition, had discovered an audience for his many funny tales

Evidently, Dr. Wallace learned quickly that it was impossible to operate the drug store and practice medicine. House calls would have taken him away from the business quite often. A partner was the logical solution to the problem, and in the *Sangamo Journal* of September 23, 1837, Wallace advertised his new partnership. The new face behind the counter belonged to Jonathan Roland Diller, who hailed from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and he had recently arrived in Springfield—probably at the request of Dr. Wallace.⁸ (The good Doctor was also from Lancaster County.) At this time J. R. Diller was twenty-three and Wallace was thirty-five. Soon the firm of Wallace & Diller became the main visiting center for Lincoln.⁹

Lincoln, of course, got well acquainted with Wallace's partner and liked him very much. Both men (Lincoln and Diller) served as managers of the cotillion party which was held at the American House on December 16, 1839. Later, on December 17, 1844, Lincoln wrote to John J. Hardin (the local Congressman) and asked that Jonathan Roland Diller be appointed postmaster of Springfield. Diller received this political plum.¹⁰ And when Diller asked for more money, Congressman Lincoln took time to reply to him from Washington on January 19, 1848.¹¹ But most of the Dillers were Democrats, and Jonathan was no exception! Although Lincoln, a Whig, had befriended him, Diller continued to delve deeply into Democratic politics. Finally on April 7, 1849, Lincoln wrote to the Postmaster General and declared that he wished Abner Y. Ellis appointed postmaster at Springfield. "J. R. Diller, the present incumbent, I can not say has failed in the proper discharge of any of the duties of the office," Lincoln reported. "He, however," Lincoln explained, "has been an active partizan in opposition to us. Located at the Seat of Government of the State, he has been, for part, if not the whole of the time he has held the office, a member of the Democratic State Central Committee. . . ." As a result of this letter, Diller got the ax and Ellis became postmaster.¹² Ellis had formerly been the partner of Joshua Fry Speed (Lincoln's most intimate friend) in the firm of A. Y. Ellis & Company. One wonders how much assistance Postmaster J. R. Diller had rendered Dr. Wallace in the store. Perhaps Diller only supervised the post office and spent most of his time selling drugs, but it is more likely that he was completely occupied with the problems of the United States mail. There is only one other explanation: Diller may have furnished a large amount of capital.

For some reason the firm of Wallace & Diller was dissolved five days after Lincoln recommended the removal of Diller from the postmastership. On April 12, 1849, Diller purchased Dr. Wallace's interest in



COURTESY LLOYD OSTENDORF

This original drawing by Lloyd Ostendorf shows the Corneau & Diller Drug Store on the east side of the public square in Springfield, Illinois. The drawing is based on a photograph taken in 1860, and it is the only correct piece of art depicting this famous site where Lincoln loafed.

the drug business.¹³ It is possible that Diller merely wished to operate the store without sharing the earnings with Wallace; perhaps Diller needed more income now that his salary at the post office was stopped. However, it may have been the busy Dr. Wallace who wished to terminate the partnership. But Diller may have felt, too, that he could no longer remain in business with Lincoln's brother-in-law as a result of their political disagreement. Although Diller became the sole owner of the old stand, his tenure was very brief. After a "painful illness of six weeks," J. R. Diller died on June 27, 1849.¹⁴

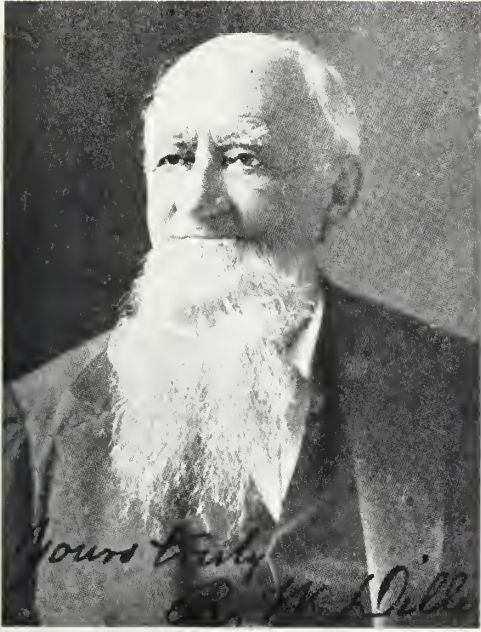
Since 1841 there had been a very competent clerk and druggist with the firm of Wallace & Diller,¹⁵ and this young man had probably filled most of the prescriptions and kept the business running smoothly. His name was Charles S. Corneau, and he was a trustworthy apothecary. It was he who kept the drug store open after the death of Diller. But Corneau certainly had no large amount of capital and needed a partner to aid him in financial matters. So, on August 10, 1849, Corneau formed a partnership with Roland Weaver Diller, a cousin of the late J. R. Diller. R. W. Diller proved to be an apt student, and Corneau taught him to be a reliable pharmacist.¹⁶ The first notice of the Corneau & Diller Drug Store was published in the *Illinois Daily Journal* on August 13.

Although the firm of Wallace & Diller had been dissolved, the complete change of ownership made no difference in Lincoln's old habits. The drug store continued "to be Mr. Lincoln's headquarters when he went downtown and did not go to his office."¹⁷ But Lincoln the lawyer had been forced to make one change in his routine, however. On November 11, 1844, Wallace & Diller (who were famous for their "Western Tonic or Fever and Ague Bitters") had announced a new location for their store. Whereas they had previously been at No. 4 in Hoffman's Row, their new spot was on the east side of the public square. A photograph taken in 1860 shows the famous drug store to have been four buildings from the south corner of

the block. At first the exact address was given as "No. 5 East Side of the Public Square," but later the numbering system was changed and the same location became No. 122 South Sixth Street.

Roland Weaver Diller was born on October 5, 1822, in Downingtown (Chester County), Pennsylvania. He was the son of Jonathan and Ann (Weaver) Diller who had been married in January of 1813. (This Jonathan Diller [1791-1831] should not be confused with Jonathan Roland Diller who operated the drug store with Dr. William S. Wallace.) Roland learned the printer's trade in Downingtown but soon went to Philadelphia. On November 3, 1844, he left Philadelphia and arrived in Springfield, Illinois, on November 23. He secured employment on December 1 with the *Illinois State Register*, a Democratic newspaper. Like Lincoln, Roland also worked as a surveyor; later, the state auditor gave Diller a job as land clerk, but politics held no interest for him. Instead of running for state auditor in 1849, Roland chose the drug business. The following year, on October 31, 1850, he married Esther Coates Ridgeway, a Quakeress, who had been born in Philadelphia on August 20, 1821.¹⁸ Diller was a Presbyterian (after 1866) and a Mason. His membership was in the Central Lodge No. 71 of Springfield, and in 1854 and 1882 he served as its master.¹⁹

Henry B. Rankin has written that the Corneau & Diller drug store "was the one most frequented by lawyers and doctors around the State House square." One should use Rankin's work with caution, but in this case his remarks are corroborated by other reliable witnesses. "The meetings here," said Rankin, "were more like those of a literary and political club than an assembly of transient loafers."²⁰ William H. Herndon, Lincoln's last law partner, declared that with the exception of several law offices there were only two or three places of business in Springfield where Lincoln loafed. His favorite retreat was Wallace & Diller (later Corneau & Diller), but he was also seen in the combination store and bank operated by Jacob Bunn.²¹ In the winter months Lincoln



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This photograph of Roland Weaver Diller, the "Veteran Druggist," was taken in 1899 when he was celebrating his golden anniversary: fifty years of business at the same old stand.

sat with his friends by the wood stove in the drug store; in the summer, the same group lined up on the sidewalk in front of the store.²² R. W. Diller himself recounted in an interview that "Mr. Lincoln used to drop in and sit for hours with friends and neighbors around the drug store stove, swapping stories and discussing public questions."²³

Yes, the center of activities during the cold months was the warm and inviting old stove. Amid the pleasant aromas of sundry drugs and the savory smell of wood smoke, a constant babble of voices drifted from the stove to all parts of the store. Of course, the coterie assembled there more often at night after their work for the day was finished. One witness said that around this pot-bellied stove "there gathered a crowd of fifteen or twenty almost every evening when there was nothing going on in town." "Most frequently," he recalled, "the talk ran to politics. Whatever the theme, Mr. Lincoln always had his story to illustrate the point

he wanted to make." But he never swore. "When he got started with his sarcasm in an argument he was merciless, and I have heard him furnish a more complete answer to an argument by a story than an hour's talk would have done."²⁴ Benjamin H. Ferguson also knew of these witty sessions at the drug store, but since "boys were not allowed to stay around there very much," he was cheated out of hearing most of the stories. He reasoned that the storytellers figured boys should be at home in the evening. But Ferguson was too genteel to hint that the stories were sometimes not intended for the ears of ladies or boys! Children often repeat in the most inappropriate places the things which they have heard. R. W. Diller, remarked Ferguson, "was a Pennsylvanian, and the crowd that came here in an early day was largely from Pennsylvania. . . . They all talked politics at times, and there were both whigs and democrats in the store. But they never had a quarrel, as earnest as they must have been. I have often thought maybe his trend of belief on the slavery question was shaped somewhat by the contact with the Pennsylvania crowd in the drug store."²⁵

When Lincoln's friends came to Springfield, they often met him at the drug store. R. W. Diller testified that David Davis, Stephen A. Douglas and Stephen Trigg Logan often joined Lincoln at the familiar stove. Circuit judges went straight to the store from the stage. Judge Logan was always whittling and sometimes he cut up the arms of the chair in which he was sitting.²⁶ When Diller ordered new chairs, he provided the old Judge with a neat stack of white pine boards for his whittling, but Logan got mad, snorted his disgust and left the store. But he could not stay away. "Well, Diller," Judge Logan piped on the first day of his return, "I had to come back. I couldn't stay away any longer!"²⁷

Dr. William S. Wallace continued to patronize the drug store years after he had sold his interest in it. In fact, he always advertised that he could be contacted at the Corneau & Diller Drug Store. This rendezvous point was in addition to the

office which he maintained in the Smith, Wickersham & Company building on the west side of the public square in 1859.²⁸ Dr. Wallace enjoyed sitting at the stove and listening to the stories, but he never got the punch line correct when he told one! His listeners must have laughed at Wallace instead of with him. On the other hand, Lincoln retold old stories many times, but he often changed the tale to fit the circumstances. These tailored stories were generally used to illustrate a political happening.²⁹

It has been stated that Lincoln sometimes played cards in the rear of Corneau & Diller's.³⁰ However, Billy Herndon declared that Lincoln never played cards!³¹ But Lincoln did enjoy a game of chess. Judge Samuel H. Treat asserted that Lincoln had a chessboard in the office,³² and perhaps Lincoln also indulged in this game at the drug store. No doubt he ventured out the back door, too, for a game of ball in the alley. Many people remember seeing Lincoln throwing a ball against a wall in a game called "fives."

Occasionally, Lincoln took his boys to the drug store during the day. Octavia Roberts Corneau recalled that "My uncle once saw him, out of his lean wallet, buy a single glass of soda water in the old Corneau & Diller drug store, holding it, for alternate sips, first to Tad's eager mouth, then to Willie's."³³

The building which Corneau & Diller occupied on the east side of the square was a wooden structure. Along with other buildings nearby, it burned on Saturday evening, February 13, 1858. These druggists lost \$3,000 worth of stock, which was insured by Aetna, but they carried no insurance on the frame store which was valued at \$1,600. Nevertheless, Corneau & Diller announced that they would rebuild immediately on the same site.³⁴

There is an interesting story connected with this conflagration. One observer said: "I remember when the store was burning meeting Mr. Lincoln with an armful of bottles he was trying to save. He stubbed his toe near the door and dropped

all the bottles. He said he was no good as a bottle carrier, and left the building. He returned, however, to help carry out the stove."³⁵ Lincoln treasured many fond memories of good times experienced around that old stove, and he certainly was glad that he could help save it for use in the new store which was soon to rise like a phoenix from the cold ashes.

But there is yet another important fact which can now be stated as a result of this tragedy on the square. Lincoln's presence at this fire and his inept bottle carrying proved to be so fascinating that I simply had to learn the exact time of the event. Once the answer was found in a file of the *Illinois State Journal*, it became evident that another day in Lincoln's life could be recorded. In the new day-by-day books published in 1960 there is no entry for February 13, 1858, but now it can be said that Lincoln was in Springfield on that date and that he was helping Corneau & Diller in their hour of dire need.

Quickly a new brick building with stone trim was erected where only burned debris had been a short time before.³⁶ The same old stove was proudly carried into the new establishment, and Lincoln immediately resumed his place beside it.³⁷ His stories once again entertained his old and trusted friends as pungent smoke leaked from the stove; at Corneau & Diller's life had returned to a familiar pattern.

Lincoln was nominated for the Presidency on the Republican ticket at Chicago on May 18, 1860, but since he did not campaign away from home that summer, he certainly made his usual trips to the drug store. And yet a note of gloom soon descended there. Charles S. Corneau died on June 8, 1860, and was buried three days later. He was a young man, only thirty-four years of age.³⁸ R. W. Diller now became the sole proprietor of the oldest drug firm in Springfield. Already his friends referred to him as the "Veteran Druggist," a title he proudly bore till the end of his life.

On February 11, 1861, Lincoln bid his friends farewell at the Great Western

depot, and the *L. M. Wiley* pulled his special train out of Springfield. Never again would Lincoln visit the Diller Drug Store. When the sad news reached Springfield that the President had been killed, R. W. Diller was eating breakfast. He pushed back his plate and walked sadly down to the old drug store to drape its front in black.³⁹ For years he kept the store just as Lincoln had known it; even the same furniture was carefully preserved, because in those very chairs Lincoln had sat many times.

When Ida M. Tarbell began writing her books about Lincoln, she journeyed to Springfield and talked with Roland Weaver Diller. She was allowed to sit in one of the famous chairs while Diller recalled his association with Lincoln. Tarbell used this information to write a number of little volumes which were titled *Back There in '58*; *He Knew Lincoln*; *Father Abraham*; and *In Lincoln's Chair*. The chief character in these stories is "Billy Brown" who was none other than Roland Weaver Diller.⁴⁰

For many years after Lincoln's death, Roland continued to operate his drug store and relate his large stock of anecdotes concerning his immortal customer who had also lived within a block of his own residence. When the Old Settlers' Society of Sangamon County was reorganized in 1868, Diller became one of the wheel horses and served as president three times. Then he dipped his pen into the ink pot and assumed the duties of secretary. About 1901 he retired from the drug store. His health had begun to fail, and he died on August 18, 1905, at the home of his daughter, Mrs. R. D. Ayers, who lived at Seventh and Jackson streets. Funeral services were conducted on August 20 and interment was made in Oak Ridge Cemetery. Another of Lincoln's old friends had joined him in peaceful sleep.⁴¹

The "Veteran Druggist," R. W. Diller, had a son, Isaac Roland Diller II, who was born on July 14, 1854. Since the Dillers lived near the Lincolns, little Isaac often played with Willie and Tad. One day in 1860 he saw a photographer, A. J. Whipple

of Boston, setting up his equipment to take a picture of Lincoln and his two youngest sons in front of their home. Isaac scurried across the street and posed at the corner of the fence, but at the last moment a horse and wagon distracted his attention. He turned his head while the shutter was open, and the top portion of his body was recorded as a blur, but that unimportant episode influenced Isaac's life. As the years spun by, he became the "only man still living who was photographed with Lincoln." As Dr. Robert L. Kincaid remarked, "it was an event which changed and enriched his life." Countless times he repeated the story of how he appeared in the photograph with Abraham Lincoln, and on February 10, 1943, Diller appeared on "We the People" in New York City.⁴²

Isaac R. Diller graduated from high school at Springfield in 1871 and decided to follow the footsteps of his father. But within a couple of years he realized that formal training was necessary to become a scientific druggist. From 1873 until the following year he attended the Chicago College of Pharmacy; then he transferred to the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and graduated in 1876. Back he came to Springfield and took his place in the same old drug store where his father still worked every day. Times were indeed changing. Both Lincoln and R. W. Diller had learned their professions while on the job, but their sons needed formal education. Robert Todd Lincoln studied law at Harvard and the University of Chicago, and now Isaac Diller had secured a college diploma in pharmacy.

Isaac married Addie May Hughes on June 30, 1880; she was the daughter of William Thompson Hughes and Dorothy (Scott) Hughes and had been born in Springfield on February 19, 1856. Their son, William Hughes Diller, was born on February 26, 1884, and graduated from both Yale and Harvard. Isaac remained in the Diller Drug Store until 1901 at which time he and his father sold out. The son then entered the real estate and insurance business. These duties occupied all his time until a few months

before his death. He died on September 28, 1943, as a result of heart trouble. Only on September 21 did he admit that he was ill. On that date he entered St. John's Hospital in Springfield. Burial was made in Oak Ridge Cemetery.⁴³

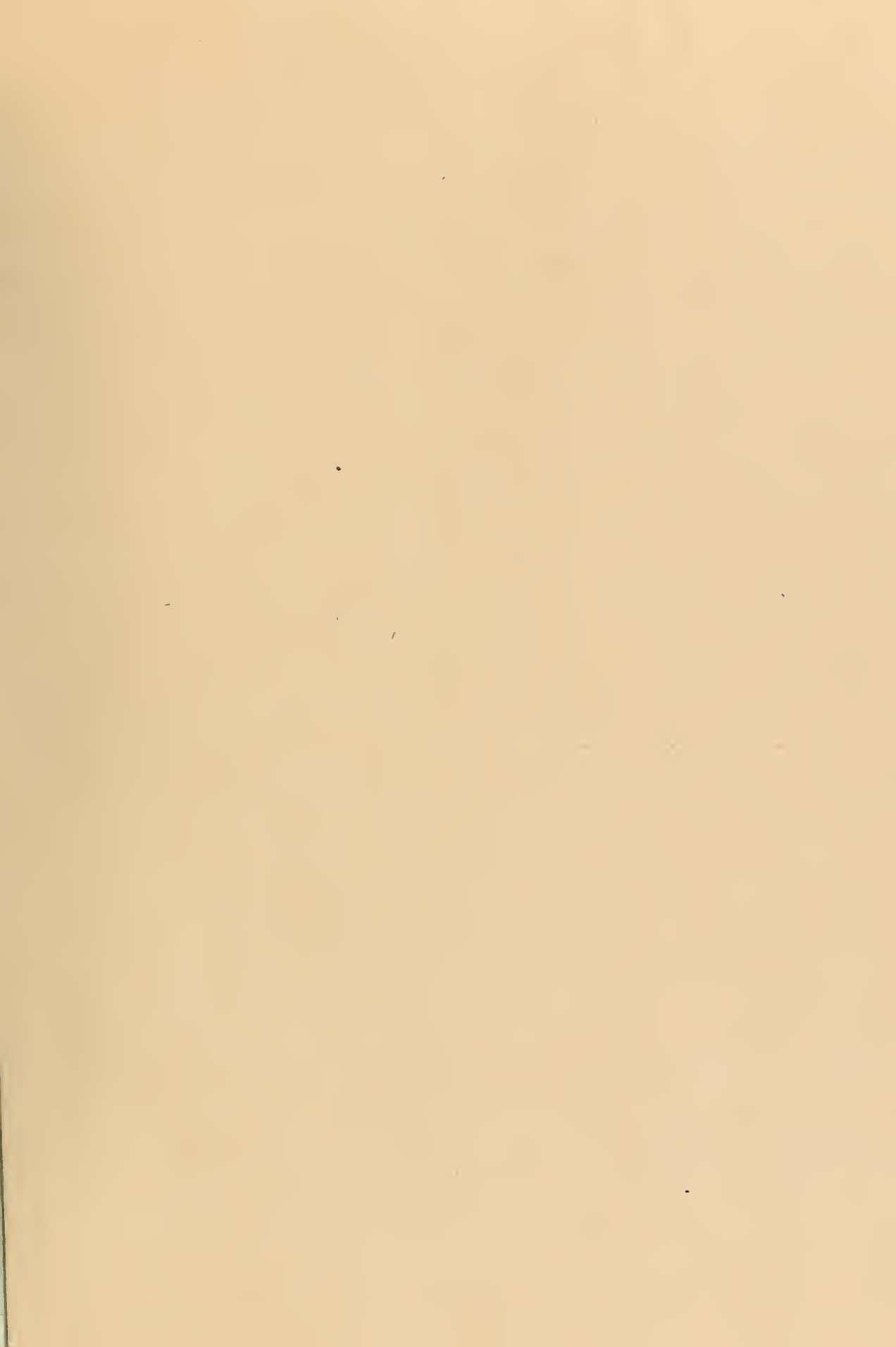
Much confusion has resulted from the fact that there were two men by the name of Isaac Roland Diller living in Springfield. To keep the record straight, I have identified Roland Weaver Diller's son as being Isaac Roland Diller II. The other man I have called Isaac Roland Diller I; he was a brother of Roland Weaver Diller. This brother was born at Downingtown, Pennsylvania in June of 1818. He also learned the printer's trade and owned a small newspaper until the Mexican War. During that campaign he earned the rank of captain and was always referred to as Captain Diller. At the conclusion of the fighting he came to Springfield and became engaged in politics as well as real estate. President Buchanan named him Consul to Bremen, Germany, in 1857, but he, of course, returned to the United

States in 1861 when the Republicans took office. Because he had lived for a number of years in Springfield, Lincoln knew him very well and respected his chemical research. During the Civil War he offered his services to the President. On August 2, 1862, Lincoln asked Gideon Welles to "afford all facilities not inconsistent with public interests to Captain Diller . . . for some chemical experiments."⁴⁴ Captain Diller was making a new type of gunpowder, and with government money he carried out experiments at Philadelphia. His new formula was a decided success, although Lincoln had to force the Navy to test it properly.⁴⁵ After the Civil War I. R. Diller returned to Illinois and re-entered politics. Because he had been chairman of the Democratic State Committee, President Cleveland named him Consul to Florence, Italy, in 1885. He remained at this post until August of 1891. Philadelphia then became his home, but he died very shortly thereafter—on November 18—as the result of a perforated ulcer.⁴⁶ He was buried, however, in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield.

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